

Records of Papua New Guinea, 1883-1942

The colonial period administrations of Papua New Guinea

From the time of its colonisation by European powers until the achievement of self-government in 1975, the modern nation of Papua New Guinea was administered by a number of governments, the military, and even a private commercial organisation. The period of administration between 1883 and 1942 can be summarised by the chronology below:

Date	Event in Papua New Guinea administration
1883	Papua annexed by Queensland (repudiated by England)
1884	New Guinea annexed by Germany (administered by Neu Guinea Kompagnie)
1888	British annexed Papua as British New Guinea
1899	Germany administers New Guinea directly
1906	Papua (formerly British New Guinea), comes under Australian rule (<i>Papua Act 1905</i> proclaimed 1906)
1914	British Administration of German New Guinea
1921	League of Nations mandate grants administration of German New Guinea to Australia
1942	Civil administration suspended

Evacuation of records to Australia

For much of this period there was an Australian interest in the administration of at least part of the country, and it is therefore not surprising that in times of crisis when there was a need to evacuate records, it was to Australia that they were sent for safe keeping. By the end of World War II, Australia was the home of a considerable collection of Papua New Guinea records. These arrived in two main shipments: records evacuated from Rabaul following a volcanic eruption in 1937, and records evacuated following the Japanese invasion in 1942.

The records evacuated to Australia included records of all administrations and comprise the following:

Papua: Reasonably complete records for some areas of the British administration (as British New Guinea) from 1884 to 1906, and the Australian administration from 1906 to 1942.

German New Guinea: Some 1500 files relating to the records of the former German New Guinea (1885–1914), and mainly routine administrative and ephemeral material for the period of military administration from 1914 to 1921. Very few records from the Australian administration of the mandated territory held in the territory at the time were evacuated ahead of the Japanese advance. Most of them were lost or destroyed during the years of Japanese occupation.

The microcopying project

From 1963 when the records were passed to the Commonwealth Archives Office (predecessor to the National Archives of Australia), plans were made to microfilm the material and return the originals to Papua New Guinea. In 1968 the first of the microfilming was completed and the process of returning original records was commenced. The project was completed in 1997 when the last of the original material was returned to the National Archives and Public Records Services of Papua New Guinea.

A full set of the records on microfilm has been retained by the National Archives and is available for use in the Canberra reading room. Copies of some of the microfilms have been digitised and are available on RecordSearch.

The collection of records

Sixty years of records under six administrations, two invasions, volcanos, major economic change and sundry other issues have made these a complex and difficult but fascinating collection of records. The records of German New Guinea – many handwritten, and in German – reveal the long-term plans for road and plantation development, and document matters that were important to colonial administrators such as exploration and health. The records from Papua reveal a concern for immediate financial issues. In New Guinea conditions were dramatically changed by the discovery of gold in 1926. The table that follows gives examples of the types of records that are included in the Papua New Guinea microfilmed series.

Examples of records in the Papua New Guinea series

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Correspondence files of the Imperial Government Over 1000 files on 86 rolls of microfilm covering routine administration and some policy material on the German mainland settlements</u>	1885–1914	G255
<u>Station letters and instructions to Government Station at Rigo Part of one roll of microfilm covering a years instructions to what is probably a typical government station in British New Guinea</u>	1886–87	G41
<u>Papua Postage Stamp Journal Part of one roll of microfilm showing how each postage stamp needed to be individually accounted for. This level of detail is not unusual in the Australian administration of this period</u>	1906–08	G165
<u>Gold (export statutory) declarations at Salamaua One roll of film. This is one of the few surviving series from New Guinea for the period and shows how gold became the economic basis of the Mandated Territory</u>	1927	G220

For more information

Research guides:

[Papua New Guinea Records 1883–1942: Microfilm Collection.](#)